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## Empathy in Aging

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*Empathy in Aging*

By

Morgan Kranz

Art Studio

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Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the  
Requirements for the Degree of Bachelor of [Arts/Science]  
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### **Artist Statement**

*Empathy in Aging* is a project exploring how to show compassion for the inevitable aging process. This form of care is physical and mental. The concept for this work comes from my time working as a nursing assistant in a nursing home. Through my experiences, this project explores what I took away through observation and interaction.

I chose hands as the subject to focus on, because I believe that hands portray a sense of individuality but are also universally understood, often as a means of communication. It was important for me to find a subject that revealed both the individual and humanity. My father told me that hands reveal the work a person has done, and that has stuck with me. The delicate, yet bold, wrinkles, scars or blemishes on a hand prove how much that person has lived through. Hands expose past events and memories through their markings.

Each separate sculpture consists of two or more life casts of hands, some including the arm, in an empathetic, caring, and/or comforting position. The process of making the molds was special because it involved people having to physically make connections with one another to bring my concept to life. Throughout the process, it took much consideration for how each hand would be involved and represented. I took into account my subjects relationships with each other when creating the poses.

The gestures that the sculptures form and the detail in every individual hand are very important. The soft and subtle formations of the hands are essential. The work portrays the aging body as beautiful. It also brings awareness to the role that others play who are not yet experiencing these forms of aging but are surrounded by the effects of change. The interaction between differing age groups is present, which enforces this concept as well. The individual pieces are displayed protruding from the gallery wall in an abstract format, in order to keep each sculpture individual and portray its own story, while contributing to the concept as a whole. Each sculpture flows with the other to bring about a feeling of comfort and harmony. My goal is to inspire a compassionate response and awareness through my work.

### **Research**

Initially, this work's idea came from an interest in the healing powers of art. I have previously explored creating paintings as a type of therapy and how a painting might look if I was using the canvas as a therapy for me personally. I aimed to continue this way of thinking by trying to combine art and science, creativity and medicine. I stumbled upon careers termed *Medical Illustrator* and *Medical Artist*. A medical illustrator is an artist with a background in science and visual communication. They transform complex medical information into visual images that can be easily understood by masses of people. Learning this term helped me understand a common ground for science and visual arts. The sciences have been incorporated into art since Leonardo da Vinci's anatomical studies. Ted Meyer was a contemporary artist whom I gained some inspiration from. A portion of his work is based on art and medicine. He did a series called *Scarred for life*. In this series the subjects were people who had scars or disfigurements. He would actually paint the scar and make an imprint of it on paper, like a painting. He then took photographs of the subjects with their scars still showing and covered in paint. Meyer found a way to make the scars a positive aspect of the person. He uses words like *powerful*, *self-identity*, and *learning* to explain the impacts of the scars on the person. Some of

my recent works have dealt with the body as the main focus. Meyer's work reminded me of a project I recently finished. My project contained two sculptures. One was an organic shape but of the shoulder and part of the chest and the other was of the side of the face. The works were made of clay and gold leaf. They reflected two areas of the body where my mother had scars from her surgery for skin cancer. I decided to make these pieces to go against the stigma that pale skin is bad or ugly and tan skin is the best. Skin cancer is very prominent in people who use tanning beds regularly or do not protect their skin from the sun. I wanted to highlight the beauty of healthy, natural skin, and also showcase my mother's scars. She was self-conscious about her scars at first but they are now a part of her. My sculptures are made of white clay and have gold flakes where the scars would be. This is a work that I would like to continue with and make a series of. There are many ways to portray the body, but sculpture is what I am first drawn to for portraying my ideas, although I have done some recent paintings and charcoal drawings of body parts. I like to keep these types of works realistic but somewhat abstract, as in not showing the full body, but showing an unusual portion or section of the body. I am drawn to depicting the body in ways that ignite an emotion in people who view it.

This was particularly my desire for another series of work that I recently completed. The series is comprised of multiple paintings of two identical organs, one of which is healthy and one of which is not. The materials are acrylic paint on glass. I chose glass instead of a more dependable alternative, like plexiglass, because I wanted it to be real in the sense that it could break if dropped or mishandled. The whole idea behind using glass was that the organ is the subject that stands out; it is not being over looked by any background. Also glass is fragile and therefore anything on the material is fragile as well. The concept is showing how the human body is delicate and precious and should not be taken advantage of. Each piece is shown in rectangles resembling a picture frame. Pictures that are framed are usually special or hold a significance and value, which enforces my concept. These two series that I mention relate to work that I want to continue in the future. I continued researching how art fits into the medical field and found some interesting results.

I found that many medical schools in the United States were now requiring students to take arts and humanities courses. It would not only trigger the creative side of the brain, helping with problem solving and the formation of new ideas, but it could allow doctors to empathize with their patients. *Empathize* was a word that stuck with me. Currently being a nursing assistant and aspiring to dive deeper into the medical field, I was intrigued by this opportunity to talk about this concept through my art. My work during clinical is what inspired me. Walking into a nursing home for the first time in my life, and being expected to care for multiple residents within a couple hours was a little terrifying at first until I realized why I was there. I was there to care for these people with the respect and treatment that I would want given me to. Interaction was the key, social, physical, even spiritual. How to portray the emotions I felt and witnessed is what I struggled with when composing my ideas for this work of art. How do I talk about such fragile topics and remain respectful since it is something I am not directly familiar with? I looked at artists working with fragile materials, such as glass. I researched Sue Tilley and Elizabeth Riggle. Both of which are artists who make astounding artworks about the body with glass, but this was not the right material for me to use. I was not looking to depict anyone as fragile or weak, instead I wanted to do the opposite. I was applauding the strength and beauty in the wonderful people I met. I went back to Ted Meyers work and utilized the way in which he was talking about a touchy subject, not directly related to him, with such reverence.



## **Process**

My most recent works have a focus on science, but one of my older works that deals with casting and mold making does not. I will discuss this body of work because it gave me knowledge of and experiences with types of casting for my recent body of work. In the beginning of 2018 I started working on a project that involved alginate molds, hands, and cement. The concept revolved around four specific people, my family members, and how their lives affected mine. The theme was based on change, and the conflicting factor of using a material that was permanent and enduring. I created alginate molds of hands, some of which were mine. The idea was to have the hands in positions that were not usual motions. Instead, they were formed to specifically show force, releasing tension, a subtle motion, unsteadiness, and a grasping. The motions relate to the changes I have been through in life and the unspecific order of them. This project allowed me to explore new materials and experiment.

Using alginate as a mold making material for the first time was fascinating to me. Being able to keep so much detail from the human hand and then being able to transfer it to a harsh material like cement was incredible. Alginate is now a mold making material that I consistently go back to when I make life castings. The whole process of life casting, the unknown, the unique design, and the finished product, is something I enjoy.

## **Materials and Their Uses**

Alja-safe alginate is the material I used to make the molds because it is safe on skin, easy to work with, generates good detailing, and has a reasonable set-up time. After I chose to use alginate to make the molds, I was torn between different materials for casting. I thought about cement or plaster, but also what those materials would say to the viewer. I wanted to use something that looked precious and showed the most detail. I heard about Smooth-On Smooth Cast liquid plastic from a peer, who was using it to cast bones. The durability and lightweight aspect that the plastic had made me decide to try it. I tested a few small pieces with the plastic and found that it suited my concept well. I chose the Smooth Cast 300Q in bright white. My concept was to represent a universal range of people. While white is often a general color, it could possibly have a race associated with it when used to represent body parts. As an alternative I chose to use a mid-tone grey. Therefore not relating to any skin color but instead representing a universal idea. I tried using powdered graphite but it did not take to the plastic as well as I had hoped. It gave the hands a dirty look, which I was not in favor of. I then tried acrylic ink, which the plastic did not bond well to either. I then tried a matte outdoor spray-paint. The spray paint applied evenly and sunk into the grooves of the skin well. My concept was to show the aging and marks on each individual hand. This I could not emphasize with the sculptures remaining one solid color. I used steel wool to abrade the surface of the paint, which left the color inside the low-points of the skin, defining the markings.

Life casting is a form of sculpture that was first documented as being used by the “ancients,” whatever time period that may be. It is not officially known. Plaster molds were being made during 7<sup>th</sup> or 8<sup>th</sup> BC. The use of plaster and gauze strips is commonly found throughout the Egyptian culture, widely known as being used for casting remains that would be placed into the sarcophagus. Many ancient plaster molds were of the human face, resembling masks. Life casts made during that time period were deemed many things: artistic, immortalizing, even suicidal. The 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century was when life casting gained more respect as an art form. It was being used to memorialize people. An example is a cast of

Abraham Lincoln's face and hands. Many leaders and popular figures were having casts made of them. The 20<sup>th</sup> century brought the idea that life casts can be made and used as prosthetics.

In the medical industry doctors have used medical moulages to learn how to recognize disease. Moulages are made by using wax to document how a person looks after they die. At this day in age, hair and color and other small details can be added to the wax in order to create an even more life-like figure. The 1700s was when moulages started being used to teach medical students. The Swiss Medical Moulage Museum houses many of moulages that can be viewed by the public. Mainly medical students and professionals come to view the exhibits and learn from them. The moulages are works of art revealing the raw body. They can be a good source of research for artists interested in working with the body, casting and for artists who want great detail in their work.

The primary material for making molds has been and is still known to be plaster. A material that I find more enjoyable and appealing to use, although it only allows for a one-time mold, is alginate. As I mentioned before, alginate is an interesting material. It is derived from a variety of brown seaweeds. Caustic soda is added to convert it to water-soluble sodium alginate. It then goes through more processing. Alginate is not only used in art, because it is hypoallergenic it has multiple uses in the medical industry as well. It is used for impressions, for dressings, has the ability to remove some metals from the blood, it is used as scaffold and myocardial implantation, and local delivery of gene therapy. It can also be used as a thickener for some foods, cosmetics, and for industrial purposes. It is a material I have become very familiar with and I enjoy exploring its numerous abilities. Its various uses in the medical field are what really impressed me. Being able to incorporate alginate into a large part of my process for this series was special because of its relation to the medical field.

## **Influences**

The main influence for my series of work was my experience working as a nursing assistant. I began my research looking at artists who depict the body in unique ways. I researched different materials and mixed media works as well. I stumbled upon Sue Tilley who works with glass. Her works had community-based concepts. She worked mainly with the female figure. Her works gave an attractive aesthetic while her concept lead to acknowledging a deeper issue. Looking back at my previous sculptures, I decided on using mold making and casting hands instead of glass. Nicole Farhi was an artist that caught my attention for her use of hands and the motions that they are in. A hard part about using hands in art is that their gestures can be cliché and generalized. Farhi does a good job at using the gestures to enhance what each sculpture is implying. The title of each individual sculpture is the name of the person who would do that action. For example she has a *Pianoist* playing the piano, and a *Painter* in motion like they are painting. Bruce Nauman struck me for his use of hands in a more abstract format. The hands were obvious but were set in unique positions. He created the hands to touch each other in ways that created great negative space. Seeing how he displayed his sculptures in a gallery setting made me realize how I would display my work. Nauman set them on pedestals, which worked for his use of material and the concept behind his series. For me, I wanted a display that was not as organized and orderly. Viewing Wendy Richmond's work had a large affect on me. I now knew that it was possible to get so much detail from a life casted hand. I also knew how much of a difference it made letting the sculptures be abstract, not so perfect, and speak for themselves. Her detail and the obvious signs of aging in each piece inspired me.

Some artists who may not work in the same materials as me, but produce work related to causes similar to mine are Lynn Skordal, Nunzio Paci, and Sara Roizen. Skordal works with mixed media, embroidery, collage, and many more media. I find most inspiration from her embroidery pieces. She also finds interesting ways to incorporate parts of the human anatomy into her collages in order to enforce her concept. Nunzio Paci creates drawings and paintings that combine the human body and nature. He focuses on the beauty and vulnerability of both the body and the natural elements of the world. Sara Roizen is an art therapist who makes paintings, wood burnings, and other types of mixed media works. Her figurative works are very simple and abstract. Color mixing showing emotions is evident throughout her paintings.

## **Outcome**

The process of preparing for this exhibition allowed me to produce a valuable series of work and learn the other important aspects that go into entering an exhibition. The time span allowed me to generate a list of ideas and come up with a concept that I knew well and that was meaningful to me. This played an important part in the rest of the project development. Knowing which direction I wanted to take my ideas helped shape my artist statement and allowed me to choose the materials that I would be using. Using a material I had never worked with was daunting but exciting. After a few test runs using the SmoothCast plastic, I was comfortable. It is a material that I became so familiar with, that I will most likely use it for future projects. How I chose to install my sculptures was something that was new to me as well. I thought about trying multiple ways to hang or stick them to the wall, i.e. command strips, drilling holes for dowels, anchoring them, and finally chose to use the dremel to make a hook in the back of each piece, that would hold them to the wall on a screw. This was the most convenient and efficient way. It allowed the pieces to be flush against the wall and sturdy enough to stay in place. It also allows for convenient hanging when shipping the works to another gallery. Two pieces from the series have been accepted into the Art of Mind Exhibit at Imurj, which will take place in Raleigh, NC. Creating this series for my first public exhibition was at times challenging, but mainly rewarding.

## Citations

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## Portfolio Images









